

Old Fourth Ward Master Plan

Part 2: Context and History



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Neighborhood History

The Old Fourth Ward is the only Atlanta neighborhood that has retained its name from the historic ward system, possibly because the neighborhood fell between more thriving areas and was never subdivided or marketed under other names by real estate speculators.

The name derives from the 1874 City Charter, which defined the City of Atlanta as a circle with a radius of 1.5 miles centered on Five Points. The city was divided into five pie-shaped wards, with the Fourth Ward consisting of the northeast quadrant and stretching as far west as what is today West Peachtree Street. In 1883, the Fourth Ward was split and the portions west of Piedmont Avenue were re-designated as the Sixth Ward, leaving the Fourth Ward essentially as it is today.

As Atlanta grew, new wards were added every few years. The thirteenth and final ward was created in 1929 to encompass the Virginia Highland area. The ward system was abolished in 1954 when the current system of city council districts was implemented.

In the first half of the twentieth century the Old Fourth Ward was a densely packed area of small houses and shops, occupied largely by African Americans. Homes were primarily shotgun houses built close together, often several rows deep on a single lot. Few of the buildings were equipped with running water.

The first of a string of events that would transform the character of the Old Fourth Ward began with the Great Atlanta Fire of 1917. Starting near Decatur Street, the fire quickly spread northward. Within hours, it had burned across nearly half of the neighborhood, until firefighters were able to contain the flames just north of Ponce de Leon Avenue. The fire left much of the neighborhood undeveloped for years, in addition to changing the character of Boulevard as brick apartment buildings replaced destroyed single-family homes.

The 1950s saw the introduction of the Interstate Highway System, and highway planners identified a route that bypassed downtown Atlanta to the



The Great Fire of 1917 destroyed nearly 2,000 buildings in the Old Fourth Ward



Construction of what is now Freedom Parkway began in 1964 and resulted in the demolition of many buildings (Image courtesy Special Collections and Archives, GSU)

east. The new route required the clearance of dozens of blocks of land on the western edge of the Fourth Ward.

In the 1960s, preliminary land clearance for the Stone Mountain Freeway led to the destruction of a large area across the center of the neighborhood before the project was stopped by a coalition of community activists. The cleared land became the site of Freedom Parkway, Freedom Park, and the Carter Presidential Center. While these assets provide much needed greenspace, mobility, and culture, the right-of-way leaves a rift in the fabric of the neighborhood. This destruction is evident in the photo shown above.

Other efforts in the 1970s further erased the historic fabric of western portions of the neighborhood as redevelopment plans attempted to address crime and urban ills through large-scale demolitions. The 1975 Bedford Pine Redevelopment Plan recommended that large portions of the neighborhood be cleared, consolidated, and replaced by what were considered progressive mini-cities of high-rise buildings. Economic and social conditions of the 1970s did not support this vision, and after the clearance the land lay vacant for over a decade until conventional “garden apartment” style complexes were built in the 1980s. Due to high crime rates, these developments were gated, high-security complexes with no relationship to the surrounding neighborhood.

Previous Studies

In recent years the Old Fourth Ward and surrounding areas have been the subject of various planning initiatives. A major element of developing this master plan has been absorbing the visions of previous, neighboring, and concurrent planning efforts to ensure that existing work is not duplicated. Each of these studies and their main recommendations are outlined below.

Old Fourth Ward Neighborhood Redevelopment Plan (1989)

This plan was conducted by the City of Atlanta Bureau of Planning in conjunction with the Old Fourth Ward’s Historic Development Corporation and the Community Design Center. The plan addressed vacant properties and assistance for low-income households in need of housing, as well as the competition that new housing and businesses present to existing stock. Loss of identity in the Old Fourth Ward and the encroachment of surrounding neighborhoods were also addressed in the plan.

Old Fourth Ward Community Redevelopment Plan (1994)

This plan outlined the goals, priorities, policies, procedural guidelines, and public redevelopment action programs for the Old Fourth Ward “Urban Redevelopment Area.” Its primary purpose was to

present a vision of the area as a rejuvenated, more economically and socially diverse community, with opportunities to live, work, and play in a safe, urban environment. The plan also focused on the need to retain a range of housing, employment, recreation, and education opportunities.

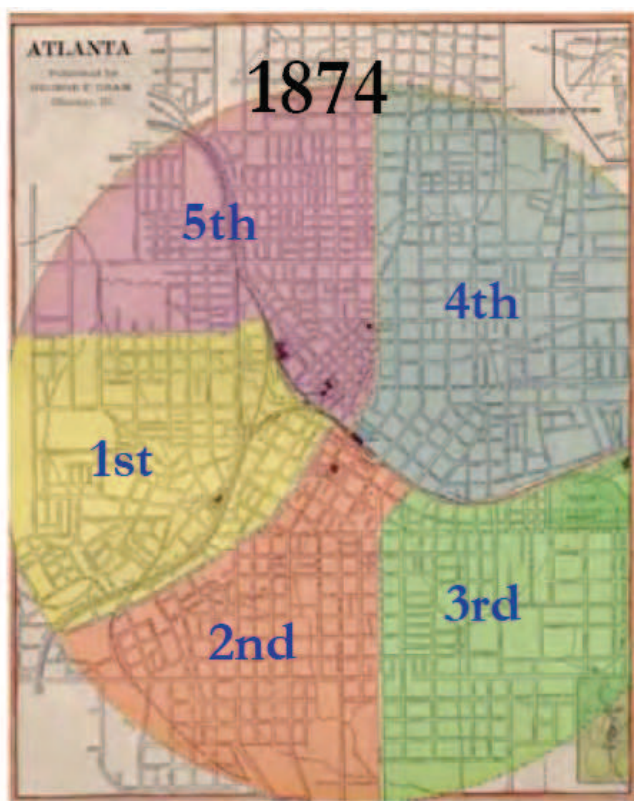
Butler Street / Auburn Avenue Community Redevelopment Plan (1994)

This plan, conducted in conjunction with the above-mentioned Old Fourth Ward Community Redevelopment Plan, focused on elements such as rehabilitating existing buildings and the expanding neighborhood amenities, with an emphasis on the arts and culture, strengthening community activism, and expanding social services.

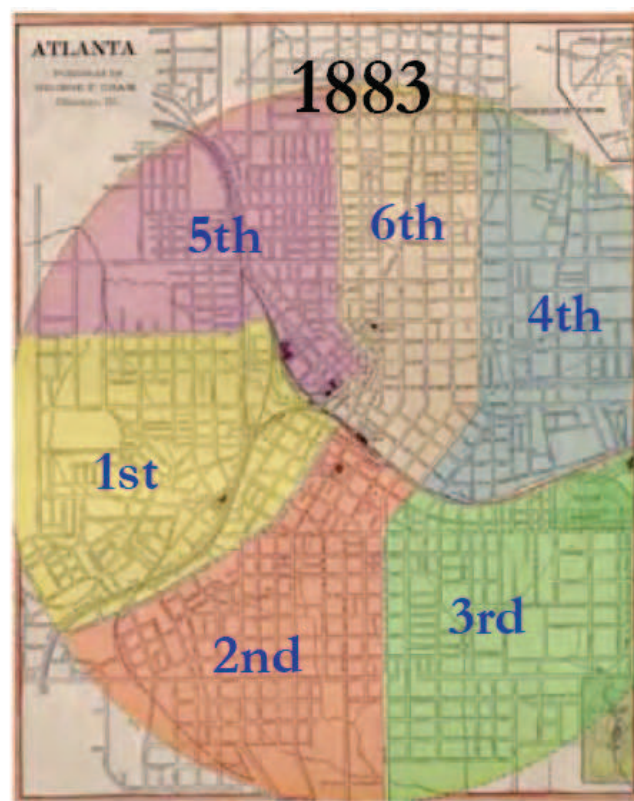
District 2 Rail Corridor Plan (2001)

This plan examined the industrial properties in Council District 2 along the abandoned railroad (the BeltLine) forming the eastern boundary of the current study area. The study found that development was occurring in a piecemeal manner, with a poor relationship to the adjacent neighborhoods and little regard for good urban design. Among the issues addressed were how to:

- Recognize and maintain the identities of surrounding neighborhoods as well as the unique character of the railroad corridor
- Design a framework to bind the existing neighborhoods, the railroad corridor, and the surrounding city together
- Mix building types and uses in future development
- Develop the corridor in environmentally sensitive and sustainable ways
- Expand public use of the railroad right-of-way and increase public space along it
- Redevelop former industrial properties to complement nearby residential areas
- Improve connectivity across the railroad and link new and existing streets
- Establish design guidelines for new development
- Allow responsible building densities



Atlanta's Wards in 1874



Atlanta's Wards in 1883

Butler / Auburn Redevelopment Plan (2005)

This plan was built upon the Community Redevelopment Plan outlined above and includes the area roughly bounded to the west by Woodruff Park, to the east by Boulevard, to the south by Decatur Street, and to the north by JW Dobbs and Highland Avenues. It's goals were consistent with those of the 1994 redevelopment plan.

The three main elements of the plan were marketing or branding the area, identifying sites for catalytic redevelopments, and updating the historic zoning district regulations. The plan outlined specific site-based design strategies and provided a pro-forma financial analysis for thirteen redevelopment projects. These projects added needed density and mix of uses to the area while preserving the extant small-scale historic buildings, many of which had connections to Martin Luther King, Jr. and African-American history in Atlanta. The projects were intended to spur economic growth.

The plan's vision promoted a dynamic, revitalized Sweet Auburn community that emphasized its

African-American history but also capitalized on the resurgence of intown living and successful mixed-use communities.

Blueprint Midtown (2004)

Originally drafted by Midtown Alliance in 1996, this update to Blueprint Midtown impacted the northwestern portion of the current study area. The plan emphasized retaining Midtown's urban character, encouraging people-friendly places, and improved connectivity. Recommendations included:

- Mid-rise buildings that blended with surrounding neighborhoods
- Distinctive signage that directed pedestrians to attractions and defined Midtown as a destination for employment and enjoyment
- Wide sidewalks with trees and decorative lighting that buffered pedestrians from traffic
- A mix of office, housing, retail, hotels, and cultural uses
- Sidewalk-oriented open spaces in large developments

- Transitions between public and private spaces with porches, awnings, sidewalk cafes, store-fronts, and courtyards

Two new zoning districts, SPI-16 and SPI-17, were approved by Atlanta City Council to codify the plan's vision and help make it a reality.

Imagine Downtown (2005)

The Imagine Downtown Plan was initiated by Central Atlanta Progress. The plan covered a four square mile area centered on the intersection of Peachtree Street and Andrew Young International Boulevard. It includes portions of the current study area south of North Avenue, west of Boulevard, and north of Freedom Parkway.

The plan proposed several items, including:

- New mixed-use buildings to transition between high-density Peachtree Street and existing low-density single-family areas
- Improved streetscapes along North Avenue, Boulevard, Ralph McGill Boulevard, Piedmont Avenue, Decatur Street, Edgewood Avenue, Auburn Avenue, and other streets
- An expanded Mayor's Park bridging the I-75/I-85 connector at Peachtree Street
- Redevelopment of the Civic Center site to incorporate new buildings and open plazas

Ponce Moreland Corridor Study (2005)

The Ponce/Moreland Corridor Study was a land use and transportation effort that looked at the northern boundary of the present study area. Its goals included:

- Improving traffic operations by focusing on the efficient use of existing pavement
- Balancing the regional roles and needs of Ponce de Leon Avenue with its context to maintain or improve vehicular operations
- Making transit more user-friendly and efficient
- Balancing the citywide need to focus new development into corridors with potential impacts on neighborhoods
- Establishing pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use nodes that built on historic land uses patterns

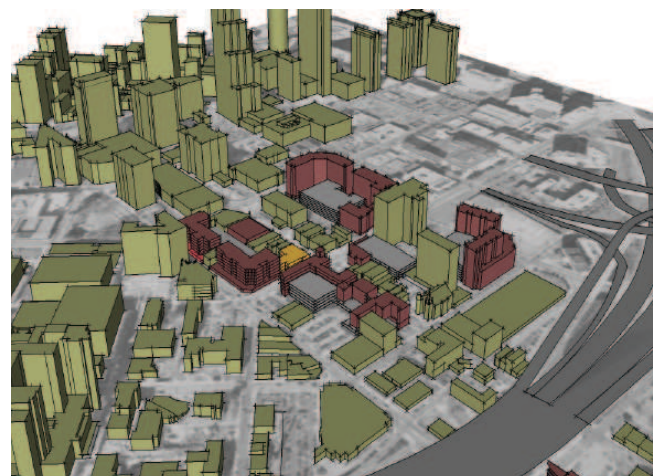
The plan recommended mid-rise, mixed-use buildings along Ponce de Leon Avenue and North Avenue within the study area rather than the current mix of largely auto-oriented uses.

BeltLine Redevelopment Plan (2005)

This plan, prepared by the Atlanta Development Authority, studied future development along the BeltLine. Recommendations for parks, transit stations, trails, street improvements, land uses, and densities affected the eastern portion of the Old Fourth Ward.

Within the study area, the plan focussed on a development node where Ralph McGill Boulevard intersects the BeltLine. It called for mixed-use development adjacent to a proposed transit station that transitioned to mid-rise residential buildings, renovated historic buildings, and parks nearby.

The transportation element of the study forecasted traffic growth on the following Old Fourth Ward streets: Boulevard, Glen Iris Drive, North Avenue, Ponce de Leon Avenue, and Ralph McGill Boulevard. Intersection and streetscape improvements were recommended for Glen Iris Drive.



Sketch from the Butler / Auburn Redevelopment Plan showing development potential in the area

Current Studies

In addition to these completed studies, a number of planning initiatives concurrent with this study will affect the future of the Old Fourth Ward Master Plan study area.

Atlanta Strategic Action Plan

The city's Comprehensive Plan, now known as the Atlanta Strategic Action Plan, is currently undergoing a partial update. It will address, but is not limited to, the following issues of concern: rapid population growth, economic development, environmental protection, affordable housing, lack of open space, transportation, and quality of life.

The partial update also includes amendments to the future land use map based on community input and the assistance of the Bureau of Planning. Constituents in the Old Fourth Ward study area have participated in charrettes and contributed to the update of the land use map for Neighborhood Planning Unit M.

BeltLine Subarea 5 Master Plan

The fifth of the BeltLine's ten subareas falls partially within the Old Fourth Ward Master Plan study area. The plan currently being developed includes the BeltLine itself as well as adjacent areas and focuses on the multiuse trail that will be constructed in the next five years. The plan will address transportation, land use, open space, and other aspects of future planning in the area.

Connect Atlanta Plan

Atlanta's first citywide comprehensive transportation plan will include recommendations for the Old Fourth Ward. It is described in more detail in Section 3.7.

Peachtree Corridor Project

In order to transform Atlanta into a world-class city, this plan proposes streetscape improvements, including a streetcar, on Peachtree Street and on Auburn Avenue and Edgewood Avenue in the Old Fourth Ward. It is described in more detail in Section 3.7.